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COLLEGE
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**OCCASIONAL PAPERS
ON THE HISTORY OF
BOSTON COLLEGE**

**JOSEPH COOLIDGE SHAW:
BOSTON YANKEE, JESUIT,
EARLY BOSTON COLLEGE PATRON**



**Rev. Charles F. Donovan, S.J.
University Historian
November, 1990**



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The first gift to Boston College — a gift of money and of books — was made in the will of a dying priest in the year 1851, thirteen years before the College accepted its first students. The donor was Father Joseph Coolidge Shaw, S.J. The relevant part of the will, which he dictated to a Jesuit friend, was this:

The deed of four thousand dollars in the Massachusetts Life Insurance (now in Father Rector's possession) I give to Father Provincial to be used with any interest that has accrued on it in establishing a school or college of the Society in Boston...

My library at home (consisting of about 1200 volumes on theological and spiritual subjects and 5 or 600 more on lighter topics) I intended for such college or colleges and Seminary of the Society as should be established in Boston...¹

The great founder of Boston College, Father John McElroy, S.J., had come to Boston in 1847 to preside over Saint Mary's parish in the North End and collect funds for the eventual establishment of a Jesuit College in the City. In 1851, when Father Shaw's will was dictated, Father McElroy was scouring Boston for a suitable location for a large church and for college buildings. Father Shaw knew Father McElroy. Indeed immediately after his ordination in 1847, Father Shaw filled in for Father McElroy at St. Mary's parish, while McElroy gave a retreat to the other priests of the diocese.² Shaw mentions Father McElroy explicitly in his will, leaving to him certain relics and reliquaries, some church linens and rosaries for use at St. Mary's Church. Shaw undoubtedly knew of Father McElroy's hopes and plans for a college in

Boston. But after all there already was a Jesuit college forty-five miles west of Boston, Holy Cross. When he dictated his will, Shaw was in the Jesuit novitiate at Frederick, Maryland, not far from the first American Jesuit college, Georgetown. And just before entering the Society of Jesus in 1850, the young priest had completed his theological studies at St. Joseph Seminary conducted by the Jesuit fathers at Fordham, New York. Why was not one of these established Jesuit institutions the recipient of Father Shaw's money and library? The reason seems to be that Joseph Coolidge Shaw was a committed and proud Bostonian.

In her Famous Families of Massachusetts Mary Caroline Crawford wrote that Father Shaw belonged to "one of the most remarkable families in the history of Massachusetts, a family which for two hundred years has played important parts in Boston's military, civic, and social life."³ His mother was a Parkman, aunt of the historian Francis Parkman, who is represented on a stained glass window in the O'Neill office in Bapst Library. His nephew, Robert Gould Shaw, died leading a black regiment in the Civil War battle for Fort Wagner, South Carolina, and is memorialized by the Augustine St. Gaudens sculpture on Boston Common across from the State House. The Shaws were related to such famous Boston families as Agassiz, Sears, Lyman, Lowell, Sturgis, Eliot, and Higginson. So it is understandable, perhaps somewhat provincial, but certainly touching that young Father Shaw, educated theologically in Rome, familiar with cardinals and popes and now for a few brief months an apprentice in a religious organization with worldwide apostolates, should on his deathbed direct his modest patrimony and his library to his native city and to the Jesuit college that was to be established there.

Joseph Coolidge Shaw was born into a Unitarian home in Boston, January 22, 1821. After attending several schools and academies he entered Harvard College in 1836. At Harvard besides the traditional classics he became proficient in French, Italian, and German. This is significant, because the study of contemporary languages in American colleges was only gaining a foothold in Shaw's time, and his later travel and study in Europe and his purchase of books in several European languages no doubt is related to his early mastery of languages other than English, Latin, and Greek. Shaw was a member of the

Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard and before his graduation in 1840 he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.⁴ After graduation, Shaw spent three years in Europe, studying German philosophy and literature in Berlin and Heidelberg and visiting the principal cities of Europe as well as the French Provinces in Africa.⁵ Since Shaw was an avid book buyer, his travels can be partially mapped by the inscriptions he frequently wrote in the books he purchased, noting the city and date of purchase. We can follow his path by noting book entries such as these: Munich, September 1841; Heidelberg, 1841; Berlin, January, 1842; Vienna, September, 1842; Frankfort, November, 1843; Paris, November, 1843.⁶

According to Father Meagher's brief biography of Shaw as a preface to the Shaw diary, the young Harvard graduate's Unitarian faith was shaken by his contact with German rationalists but on a boat trip to Rome he chanced to meet the future Catholic priest, Frederick William Faber, a leading member of the Oxford Movement, who was still an Anglican clergyman at the time. Faber introduced Shaw to a Jesuit, Father Thomas Glover, in Rome and very abruptly, one month later, Joseph Shaw was baptized and confirmed by Charles Cardinal Acton in Rome.⁷

Shaw returned to Boston in 1843 and attended Harvard Law School for a year. A fellow student at the Law School was his friend and classmate from undergraduate years, Edward Holker Welch. The lives of the two men were intertwined. Like Shaw, Welch had become a Catholic while traveling in Europe in 1841. He followed Shaw into the priesthood and into the Society of Jesus. After studying theology in Paris, Welch was ordained in Rome in 1850 and was then admitted to the Society of Jesus. He was sent to the Jesuit novitiate in Frederick, Maryland, where Joseph Coolidge Shaw was also a novice, and when Shaw was deathly ill, it was Welch who wrote down the contents of his will.⁸ When twelve years after Shaw's death the dream of a Jesuit college in Boston approached realization with the granting of a charter by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Shaw's friend Edward Welch was one of the incorporators whose signature is on the Boston College charter, and he became one of the first trustees of the University.

After one year at Law School, Joseph Shaw felt called to the priesthood. In 1844 he was accepted as a student at the Roman College. At his father's request and with the

approval of Father Glover, his confessor and advisor, he returned to Boston in the summer of 1847. In September Bishop John Fitzpatrick ordained him in the old cathedral of the Holy Cross on Franklin Street.⁹ Ordination to the subdiaconate and diaconate and then to the priesthood took place in a span of four days in September. Father Shaw had a sense of the importance of his family in Massachusetts, for he wrote in his diary three years later: "The ordination was a species of triumph for the Church in Boston, not of course as regards me personally, but from the circumstances of my family, etc. My Father and Mother who were present themselves at the three ordinations invited a great many of their friends, & especially at the last ordination the church was full of Protestants, & the papers talked a good deal of the matter."¹⁰

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Shaw's diary shows a preoccupation with his books. He never comments on his various acquisitions, but every time he moved there was special reference to his books. For example when he was leaving Rome to return to Boston for ordination, he notes: "...packed up about half of the 900 or 1000 books I had collected, and sent them by Plowden and Cholmeley, leaving the rest under the charge of Wm. Clifford..."¹¹ Clifford was a fellow-seminarian who later became a bishop in England.

When he was about to leave St. Joseph Seminary for a final trip with his family before entering the novitiate, Shaw noted in his diary: "On Monday, Aug. 2nd (having packed up all my books & other things during the two preceding days), I took leave of Fordham with much gratitude to the Fathers..."¹² When he paid his last visit to the family home in Boston where the bulk of his books had been left during his stay at Fordham and were to be left when he entered the Society of Jesus, he noted: "I remained in Boston till the 17th, packing my books, open not nailed however, & to remain in the house."¹³ Since he was talking about 1700 or more volumes, one can picture them lined

up neatly in wooden boxes, but with the covers not nailed as if for shipment.

Shaw's life in the Society of Jesus was to be a sadly short one — six months and two days. In the fall of 1850 his diary recorded cheerfully the simple routine of novitiate life — prayer, spiritual conferences, waiting at table, washing dishes, gathering evergreens for liturgical festivals. The last entry was made on January 21, 1851: "I read in the Refectory all last week, which was pretty fatiguing as I had a bad cold & cough & today F. Minister has regularly put me on the sick-list..." His sickness was apparently tuberculosis and he spent his remaining weeks in bed. In February he decided to make a will and on two days, the 16th and the 18th, dictated his will to his priest-friend, and fellow novice, Father Edward Welch.

The will begins: "As God may very probably withdraw me from this life shortly I wish to make a disposition of my few effects as appears best for His service." The will consists largely of intimate small gifts to members of his family. The more businesslike part of the will and the only bequests of substance have to do with the money and books for Boston College. The family part of the will was dictated on February 16:

...To my brother Frank I give the Arab coat, cap etc. now in his possession. To Sarah Russel the gold pen & pencil case (which is here) and the purse with gold rings which she gave me. To my Bro. Parkman I give my gold shirt buttons. To Robert the scimitar now in his possession. To Mary R. the silver paper cutter she gave me (that is in my trunk I believe upstairs). To my sister Anna, the silver napkin ring given me by her and Lizzie. To Howland the silver shaving brush he gave me. To Quincy my oriental pipes, gun sword, pistols, etc. To Marian my painted German pipe (as an ornament) with the Arab purses and other little articles in mother's possession. To Frank's little Effie the prettiest little coral & silver rosary that can be found in my collection, with my blessing. Finally to my Father & Mother I leave the bronze crucifix on the table in my room with the tenderest love and respect and gratitude for their unwearied kindness and liberality, my sorrow for everything by which I have offended them and my prayers for their welfare & happiness and that they and my brothers and sisters may be brought to the bosom of the Catholic Church

before God calls them to follow me.

N.B. The articles above mentioned are mostly in my wardrobe at home.¹⁴

This is the part of the will dictated on February 16, 1851. It illustrates Shaw's meticulous attention to detail and his delicate thoughtfulness towards each member of his family, so clearly expressed just three weeks before his death. Shaw's was a large family. Besides his five brothers and three sisters mentioned in the will, a brother William had died in infancy and a younger sister Elizabeth had died in 1850.

When Shaw continued dictating two days later he turned his attention to other than family matters — mostly to the as yet non-existent Jesuit college in Boston. He began: "Whatever money, books or other effects of mine may be in this house [the novitiate] at the time of my death or may by chance be sent here for me after it, I give to F. Rector for the use of the Novitiate or Tertianship. Except the gold pen and pencil case and the silver paper cutter above mentioned and except any odd volumes of books, which should be sent to Boston that the set may not be broken."¹⁵ Every bibliophile and librarian reading this will applaud the dying Shaw's concern that no set of books be broken. Implicitly he was concerned for the integrity of the Boston College library collection. But they will applaud even more warmly a parenthesis Shaw inserted later in the will: "(A list of the greater part of my theological and spiritual books will be found in a little green account book which is either here or in my bookcase at home.)"¹⁶ How he loved his collection and how proudly he recorded it — a thousand entries in his own hand. But, alas, the little green book has disappeared. Perhaps, when after Shaw's death the cases of books were shipped presumably to the Jesuit Provincial's office in Maryland, it was thought that with the books in hand, Shaw's listing of them was unimportant. What we would give to have that little green book as part of our treasures in Burns Library.

We must now present the final section of the Shaw will that concerns his books. Immediately after the paragraphs quoted at the beginning of this essay, concerning the four thousand dollars for a school or college of the Society in Boston and his library of 1200 volumes on theological and spiritual subjects and 500 or 600 more on lighter topics intended for a college to be established in Boston, Father Shaw added: "...but as there is no immediate prospect of

Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard and before his graduation in 1840 he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.⁴ After graduation, Shaw spent three years in Europe, studying German philosophy and literature in Berlin and Heidelberg and visiting the principal cities of Europe as well as the French Provinces in Africa.⁵ Since Shaw was an avid book buyer, his travels can be partially mapped by the inscriptions he frequently wrote in the books he purchased, noting the city and date of purchase. We can follow his path by noting book entries such as these: Munich, September 1841; Heidelberg, 1841; Berlin, January, 1842; Vienna, September, 1842; Frankfort, November, 1843; Paris, November, 1843.⁶

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Shaw's purchases showed his growing interest in the Society of Jesus. In January 1847 in Rome he purchased a life of St. Ignatius by a Fr. Muriani, Vita del Patri S. Ignazio, that was published in Venice in 1845. And on May 13, 1848 he bought an English translation of a French treatise on the Jesuits by Father DeRavignan, On the Life and Institute of the Jesuits, that was published in Philadelphia in 1845.

His secular volumes include a number of books in German and French on philosophy as well as large volumes of Tasso and Dante, Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, the Poetical Works of Thomas Gray, a 4-volume edition of Shelley, the poetry of William Cowper, and an edition of Thomas Carlyle's The French Revolution published in Boston in 1839 with an inscription on the fly-leaf, "Joseph Coolidge Shaw from his Friend and classmate Moses William Weld. August 26, 1840." That was the summer after their graduation from Harvard and may have been a graduation present or perhaps a going-away present as Shaw prepared for his European adventure.

To come in contact with the Shaw collection, to feel the bindings and smell the pages and note his elegant signature or initials with date and place of purchase in so many of them and remember that all of them were carefully recorded in the little green book by the purchaser is to marvel that even before its existence the Boston College library had a patron as assiduous and discriminating in book collecting as Joseph Coolidge Shaw. He is indeed a patron saint for

Burns Library.

The first formal account of the Boston College library was written by Father Edward I. Devitt, a gifted president, for the 1893-94 catalogue. The collection was now in existence for thirty years and this was the first published acknowledgement of various special gifts. Father Devitt appropriately gave first notice to Father Shaw. He wrote: "The stately tomes, which form the nucleus of the Theological alcove, were contributed by the Rev. Joseph Coolidge Shaw, S.J. who, after his conversion to the Catholic Church, went abroad and with the cheques of a generous father bought many volumes in Paris and Rome." To that generous father, Robert Gould Shaw, and to the generous-spirited, book-loving son, Boston College is forever, happily, indebted.

such being established I give them to Father Provincial either to be left in Boston or to be brought here for the use of the Tertianship or in fine to make such distribution of them as he judges best."¹⁷ This is a critically important condition to which we will return. At the end of the will was the name "J.C. Shaw" and beneath it in parentheses, "per E.J. Welch."¹⁸

Father Walter Meagher writes of Father Shaw: "Six days before his death he received the last Sacraments of the Church, and then, according to the custom of the Society, he was allowed to make his vows. Notwithstanding his great weakness, he read them so as to be heard all over the room. He then gave his blessing to the novices and scholastics of the community, wishing them all the grace and perserverance in their holy vocation."¹⁹ Joseph Coolidge Shaw died on March 10, 1851 at the age of thirty.

Of the 1700 books collected and treasured by Father Shaw, 350 are in the Burns Library. Obviously Father Ignatius Brocard, the Provincial in Maryland, acted upon the clause at the end of Father Shaw's will which said "...in fine to make such distribution of them [the books] as he [Provincial] judges best." Indeed in 1851 there was no immediate prospect of a college opening in Boston. Not only was Father McElroy to run into political opposition but a catastrophic Civil War was to intervene before McElroy's and Shaw's hopes were to be realized. The Shaw family may well have been anxious to have son Joseph's precious boxes removed from their home. Georgetown was the most prominent Jesuit college at the time and plans were afoot to establish a seminary in the Province. Actually Woodstock College, the Jesuit seminary, opened in 1869, five years after Boston college accepted its first students. It is known that some Shaw books are in the Georgetown library. It should be noted that the man who wrote Shaw's will for him, Father Edward Holker Welch, signed the charter of Boston College and was a member of the first board of trustees in 1863. Had he felt Shaw's will regarding the disposition of the books had been violated he presumably would have made representation on his friend's behalf. Fifty-seven years after Father Shaw's death Father Welch wrote a memorial of him in the Jesuit journal, Woodstock Letters. He recalled the deathbed dictation of the will. "...his father at the time of his ordination had given him the sum of \$3000. This with the interest which had accrued he now

left to the college of the Society that was to be built in his native town, and which is known as Boston College. To the same institution he left his valuable library collected partly in Germany, but principally in Rome. He is thus the earliest benefactor of that now flourishing Institution."²⁰ Father Welch notes and applauds the intention of the dying Father Shaw to benefit Boston College. That circumstances intervened that kept Shaw's hopes from being fully realized, Welch did not think worth mentioning. Obviously he was satisfied with the division that had been made of the Shaw library and felt that Boston College was the principal recipient of the young Boston priest's benefaction.

Those who are downcast at the realization that only 350 of Father Shaw's 1700 volumes eventually came to Boston College may be reminded of the most famous gift of books to a college in American history — John Harvard's donation of his library to the infant institution in Cambridge in 1638. His library consisted of 320 books.²¹ There are startling similarities between Joseph Coolidge Shaw and John Harvard. Both were clergymen. Both died very young apparently of tuberculosis, Shaw at 30 and Harvard at 32. Both made wills on their deathbed. Both are best remembered for their benefactions of money and books, one to a nascent, the other to a pre-nascent institution of higher learning in the Greater Boston area. Shaw left \$4000 for Boston College. John Harvard's bequest was £779 but Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison says only £375 was received by the College.²²

The Shaw books in Burns Library are an impressive collection especially as the work of a sole collector who apparently used no agent. The collection is overwhelmingly theological. The largest item though not necessarily the most valuable is Gian Domenici Mansi's monumental series of tomes on the Councils of the Church, Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio in 31 folio volumes covering the councils from the early church to the Council of Florence in 1438. The volumes were published, in Latin, with some Greek, from 1758 to 1798. Despite Father Shaw's warning against splitting a set, Boston College does not have volumes 29, 30, or 31. An equally ambitious piece of scholarship is the 26-volume work of Henri Francois Vence in French, called Sainte Bible de Vence, giving the Latin text with French translation of every book of the Old and New Testaments plus elaborate

commentaries. Shaw's edition, the fifth, was published in Paris in 1827. There is also a 10-volume Histoire Generale de L'Eglise published in Paris in 1841. That date, incidentally, was the first year of young Shaw's European trip and it reveals something about Shaw as a collector. It is surprising how many of the books in the collection, even works written centuries earlier, bear a recent publication date, e.g. 1830–1845. A good example is St. Robert Bellarmine's De Controversiis, published in Rome in 1836. There is, however, a set of St. Augustine's works in nine volumes, published in 1768. And there is one extraordinarily well preserved volume of commentaries on St. Thomas Aquinas published in Venice in 1559. But one gathers from surveying the entire collection that Shaw did not shop as an antiquarian but in the various cities of his travels he visited bookstores most of whose volumes would bear recent dates of publication.

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NOTES

¹Rev. Walter J. Meagher, S.J., ed., "A Proper Bostonian, Priest, Jesuit.": Diary of Fr. Joseph Coolidge Shaw, S.J., (1821–1851), privately printed, pp. 77–8.

²Ibid., p. 11.

³Mary Caroline Crawford, Famous Families of Massachusetts (Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 1930), Vol. I, p. 233.

⁴Meagher, op. cit., p. ix.

⁵Ibid.

⁶It is worth noting that a well known precedent for Shaw's academic 'grand tour' in Europe with book buying as a prime byproduct was set by Harvard professor George Ticknor, who incidentally was the person responsible for gaining respectability at Harvard for the teaching of modern languages. In his Three Centuries of Harvard Samuel Eliot Morison records that in 1815 Harvard sent two promising faculty members in their early twenties to the University of Gottingen for two years — George Ticknor and Edward Everett. Morison says both men made purchases in Europe on behalf of the Harvard library and he cites at length a letter Ticknor wrote from Gottingen in 1816 stressing the great catch-up problem facing American college libraries. It is quoted here because of its relevance to Shaw's assiduous collecting for Boston College.

...One very important and principal cause of the difference between our University [Harvard] and the one here is the different value we affix to a good library, and the different ideas we have of what a good library is... We found new professorships and build new colleges in abundance, but we buy no books; and yet it is to me the most obvious thing in the world that it would promote the cause of learning and the reception of the University ten times more to give six thousand dollars a year to the Library than to found three professorships... I cannot better explain the difference between our University in Cambridge and the one here than by telling you that here I hardly say too much when I say it consists in the Library, and that in Cambridge the Library is one of the last things thought and talked about, — that here they have forty professors and more than two hundred thousand volumes to instruct them, and in Cambridge

twenty professors and less than twenty thousand volumes...

We note with satisfaction that, nearly four decades after their European sojourn, both Ticknor and Edward Everett befriended Father John McElroy in his struggle, against Protestant opposition, to acquire land in Boston for the Jesuit college he wished to found.

⁷Meagher, op. cit., pp. ix, x.

⁸Ibid., p. x, p. 84.

⁹Ibid., p. x.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹Ibid., p. 5.

¹²Ibid., p. 47.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. xi.

²⁰Woodstock Letters, Vol. 26 (1897) pp. 446–450.

²¹Justin Winsor, "Libraries in Boston" in The Memorial History of Boston (Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1881), Vol. IV, p. 279. Winsor was librarian of Harvard University.

²²Samuel Eliot Morison, Three Centuries of Harvard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 9.

